

MBA schools filled and over-flowing

The master's in business administration (MBA) remains one of the most sought-after business degrees and applications at many top schools outstrip the availability of spaces enrollment this year.

Only about two out of five applicants were admitted at the University of Stellenbosch's Business School, which became the first South African institution to be awarded all three international forms of accreditation.

At the University of the Free State Business School, the number increases to roughly one in two, whereas Wits Business School admitted about 40% of its applicants.

Enrolment numbers have doubled over the past year at the Johannesburg campus of the UK-based Henley Business School, which also enjoys triple accreditation.

"The South African MBA is still sought after. From the University of SA [Unisa] to Wits, the Gordon Institute of Business Science [Gibs], Stellenbosch and the University of Cape Town - they're all full to capacity," said Anne Wilson, manager at the South African Business Schools Association [Sabsa]. |

"The business schools with a more online and distance focus, like Regenesys and Mancosa, are also packed," wilson said.

Getting a seat at one of Sabsa's 18 member schools, whose entry requirements vary from institution to institution and generally include a combination of a degree, work experience and passing an admissions test, may soon become more difficult.

In November, Sabsa proposed to the Council for Higher Education that it implement higher entry requirements to ensure the MBA was in line with the admissions requirements and characteristics of other master's programmes. These discussions were continuing, Wilson said.

"The MBA is still very popular and remains the standard for general management education at senior level. The numbers are down, though, for the full-time MBA, but this is a worldwide trend," said Marietjie Wepener, deputy director of business development, marketing and communication at the University of Stellenbosch Business School.

There has been a shift towards modular and part-time MBA programmes, also known as the "executive MBA". The school's part-time MBA had become more popular since it changed the format from weekday evenings to weekends, said Wepener.

"The trend is to keep working and study while you work, even over weekends, if you do not get time off from your employer."

The popularity of the MBA was driven by a "greater demand for leaders with good business acumen, people who are practically oriented with a can-do attitude, independent thinkers and people who are able to think critically and strategically," said Jon Foster-Pedley, dean at Henley.

Recent study

A recent study by the Graduate Management Admission Council, which administers the internationally recognised graduate management admissions test for business schools, found that more than half of the 359 schools surveyed reported an increase in applications for their MBA, master's and PhD programmes for the 2012-13 academic year, compared with 2011-12. The largest increase in applicants was in the specialised master's and PhD programmes in business, as well as distance and online MBA programmes, the study found.

More companies are planning to hire recent MBA and business master's graduates in 2013 than in 2012, reflecting "market buoyancy for these skills among companies worldwide", another council study found. According to the study, which polled 201 employers in 31 countries in November, the vast majority of companies also anticipated an increased demand for experienced direct-industry talent and newly minted bachelor's degree holders.

There is insufficient reliable data available to determine to what extent an MBA would improve the salary and job prospects of graduates, Wepener said.

"Generally, we find at Gibs that on graduation the majority of our graduates remain with their companies but report higher levels of responsibility and enjoy career progression and financial rewards," said Nicola Wilson, communications manager at Gibs.

Although the cost of enrolling at a business school can be prohibitive, a limited number of bursaries is available and companies in South Africa generally remain keen to pay for employees' studies.

However, the proportion of sponsored students varies from school to school. At Gibs, about 80% of students were sponsored fully by their companies, said Wilson. "Companies are investing heavily in their senior management and leadership pipeline and want these candidates to have all-round general management exposure.

"They also are being very certain about the business schools they want their talent pipeline to get into," Wilson said.

For those who are hungry for the business knowledge but not fussed about officially graduating, Regenesys is offering all its learning materials for free on its website. Coursera also provides academic business programmes by some of the world's top universities, including Stanford and Duke, free online.

To stay relevant, business schools must continually adapt programmes to ensure students are equipped with the appropriate knowledge, practical experience and skills. "Personal skills and leadership skills are becoming more important; these 'soft skills' make up an important part of our MBA," said Wepener.

"We have a personalised leadership module, where reflection and other techniques are used to instil leadership skills in students.

"Other value-added services, like career services, have become essential in the last few years. People plan their careers better and business schools must assist them in this development," Wepener added.

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